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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000425

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TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: BACK CHANNEL TALKS BETWEEN SINIORA AND
AOUN

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Following initial contacts between representatives of Prime Minister Siniora and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun in late December, a series of substantive meetings were held in January between the two camps in an attempt to come up with a blueprint for Lebanon's political and economic reform. These meetings mark the first time that Aoun's representatives directly engaged the Siniora government in an attempt to find common ground on the way forward for Lebanon. It would also seem to indicate that the Aounists were interested in conducted parallel talks on national goals: one set with the Siniora government and a second with Hizballah's Nasrallah (which culminated in the release of the February 6 joint communique). Although the Aoun-Siniora talks were at a stage far behind the Aoun-Nasrallah talks in terms of issues covered and actual words put down on paper, the two sets of discussions have the potential to lead to all-party talks if the political will exists. End summary.

12. (C) Toufiq Hindi, a former political strategist for Samir Ja'ja' who has established a fairly eclectic range of contacts across Lebanon's political spectrum, met with poloff on February 10 to discuss the confidential Aoun-Siniora talks and request USG assistance in encouraging the participants to resume and indeed accelerate the process.

CAUTIOUS BEGINNING

13. (C) According to Hindi, Michel Aoun raised the possibility of discrete talks with the Siniora government during a meeting in mid-December. He asked Hindi to contact Siniora, but asked that his interest be kept confidential until Siniora indicated some degree of support for the idea. On December 24, in a meeting arranged by Nawaf Salam, a member of the Electoral Law Commission, Hindi broached the idea of an Aoun-Siniora dialogue with the prime minister. According to Hindi, Siniora asked why Aoun hadn't mentioned the idea when he personally visited Aoun in Rabieh in early December. Nevertheless, Siniora placed an immediate phone call to Aoun and the two leaders quickly agreed that their representatives should meet to determine if there was any basis for a more intensive effort. A few days before the end of the year, Mohammad Chattah, the prime minister's senior adviser, met with the ubiquitous Aoun advisor, Gibran Bassil, at the home of Toufiq Hindi. (Note: Bassil was also then directly engaged in negotiations with Hizballah, which produced the February 6 communique. End note.)

¶4. (C) Hindi reported that the initial meeting discussed general parameters, as well as an agreement on how the talks would be conducted. Both representatives agreed that any talks should be "set apart" from the often bitter attacks that characterize political discourse in Lebanon, that is, the talks would not be used to political advantage, or subject to walkouts because of public clashes between the two sides. It was also decided that the talks would remain confidential until such time as both parties reached

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agreement, or mutually determined that continuing the talks was no longer worthwhile.

¶5. (C) Almost two weeks then passed, a delay which Hindi said was due to indecision on the part of Siniora, when in mid January, the first of three "substantive" meetings was conducted between Chattah and Bassil, with Hindi serving as facilitator and recorder. (Note: Hindi showed poloff extensive notes from the meetings, as well as a 4-page summary of issues discussed and what he said were points partially agreed upon. He did not provide copies for further study. End note.) According to Hindi, the broad outline of the "blueprint" was similar to the Aoun-Nasrallah communique, but the planned Aoun-Siniora document also included extensive language on the need to adapt and update the Taif Agreement, an issue not addressed by the Aoun-Nasrallah document. In Hindi's opinion, the discussions were going well and by the end of the third meeting, the participants had reached agreement on roughly one fourth the issues.

THE AOUN-NASRALLAH COMMUNIQUE INTERVENES

¶6. (C) Usually the meetings were held each Thursday, but at
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the request of Bassil, the schedule was accelerated and two meetings were scheduled for Tuesday and Thursday, February 7 and 9. However, on February 6, one day after violent Sunni protests in downtown Beirut, Michel Aoun and Hassan Nasrallah sent shocks through Lebanon's political system with the joint communique -- and in so doing, delivered a sharp rebuke to the Siniora government. On Tuesday afternoon, a few hours before the scheduled meeting, Chattah called Hindi and said "personal matters" would probably prevent him from attending.

In an effort to save the talks, Hindi continued plans to hold the meeting in the hope that Chattah would change his mind. Bassil showed up at the appointed time and immediately suspected an apparent rebuff. However, somewhat unexpectedly, both Chattah and Bassil did show up for Thursday's meeting, however it immediately ended when Chattah stated that Siniora was suspending the talks to "consider the situation." Despite the external developments, Hindi urged both parties to return to the talks as soon as possible.

¶7. (C) Toufiq Hindi has asked the embassy to discretely use its influence with both Siniora and Aoun to return to the talks to address the major issues confronting Lebanon, rather than continually criticize each other through the media. From what he had observed in the Chattah-Bassil meetings, whose course he said was clearly being directed by Siniora and Aoun, Hindi said he believed that a document covering many of the same issues as the Aoun-Nasrallah communique -- but reflecting a much more democratic tone -- could be achieved. He said he was at a loss to explain the timing of the February 6 communique, but that pro-democratic forces had to work with what they had.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Toufiq Hindi was considered to be a political outsider since his estrangement from the Lebanese Forces, but

his intermediary role in these new talks indicate he has regained legitimacy. These talks, as abbreviated as they were, could form the basis of a broadening of the March 14 coalition, if they can be reconvened. A statement of principles or national objectives would join Aoun's forces with the pro-reform Siniora government, and would provide a counter-weight to the flawed Aoun-Nasrallah communique. If handled correctly, it could also remove the stigma of passivity from the Siniora government, which has spent most of its limited time and resources on trying to maintain cabinet unity and defending itself from domestic and Syrian criticism.

¶9. (C) In a meeting with Siniora on February 11, the Ambassador brought up the possibility of dialogue with Aoun. Siniora unexpectedly called Mohammad Chattah into the meeting and asked him to brief the Ambassador on the discussions broked by Hindi with Bassil. Chatta said the meetings held thus far had been useful, but in contrast to the picture painted by Hindi, he indicated they had not progressed very far on substantive issues. What Hindi had told us was a document of partially agreed upon points, Chattah and Siniora described as merely an agenda for discussion. While agreeing with the Ambassador that it was important to keep a dialogue going with Aoun, neither Siniora nor Chatta indicated by their remarks that the talks would soon resume.

¶10. (C) These talks have the potential to provide a foundation for a more inclusive pro-reform coalition, or they may simply become a missed opportunity. As it has for several months, Embassy Beirut will continue to encourage Siniora to engage with Aoun -- and vice versa -- to create a united, pro-sovereignty front to contain and reduce the influence of Hizballah and its Syrian/Iranian backers. End comment.
FELTMAN